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# Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Chair: Mrs. Kelly Block





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• (1100)

[English]

**The Chair (Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 28 of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

The committee is meeting in public today and is being televised.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee is meeting today to study “Report 3—Access to Safe Drinking Water in First Nations Communities—Indigenous Services Canada” of the 2021 reports 1 to 5 of the Auditor General of Canada.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021. Therefore, members may be attending in person in the room or remotely by using the Zoom application. However, I understand that everyone is attending virtually today, so for those of you who are, I will just go through a few reminders.

Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either “Floor”, “English” or “French”. Before speaking, click on the microphone icon to activate your own mike. When you are done speaking, please put your mike on mute to minimize any interference. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly.

Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of a headset with a boom microphone is mandatory for everyone participating remotely.

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise the chair. Please note that we may then need to suspend a few minutes, as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

If the members agree, I'd like to take about five minutes at the end of the meeting for a bit of committee business.

Now I'd like to welcome our witnesses. Joining us today from the Office of the Auditor General are Karen Hogan, Auditor General of Canada, and Glenn Wheeler, principal. From the Department of Indigenous Services, we have Christiane Fox, deputy minister; Joanne Wilkinson, senior assistant deputy minister, regional operations sector; Chad Westmacott, director general, community infrastructure branch; and Jennifer Esdaile, director, strategic water management.

I will now turn it over to Ms. Hogan for five minutes.

• (1105)

**Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General):** Madam Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss our recent report on access to safe drinking water in first nations communities. Joining me today is Glenn Wheeler, the principal who was responsible for the audit.

Reliable access to safe drinking water is vital to the health and well-being of all, including the people living in the more than 600 first nations communities across Canada. Many of these communities have lived for a long time without the assurance that their drinking water is safe.

In 2015, the federal government committed to eliminating all long-term drinking water advisories on public water systems on first nations reserves by March 31, 2021.

Overall, Indigenous Services Canada has not provided the support needed to ensure that first nations communities have ongoing access to safe drinking water. In fact, in December 2020 the minister acknowledged that the department was not on track to meet its March 31 target.

We found that since the federal government's 2015 commitment, there have been a total of 160 long-term drinking water advisories on public water systems in first nations communities. As of November 1, 2020, 60 remained in effect in 41 first nations communities, with almost half of the advisories having been in place for more than a decade.

In addition, we found that some long-term advisories were lifted only as a result of interim measures that did not fully address the underlying deficiencies. For some of these water systems, long-term solutions were not expected to be completed until 2025.

[Translation]

The audit team also found that Indigenous Services Canada's efforts have been constrained by an outdated policy and formula for funding the operation and maintenance of public water systems. The department had not amended the funding formula since it was first developed 30 years ago. Until the formula is updated, it is unclear whether recent funding increases will be sufficient to meet first nations' water infrastructure needs.

The department has been working with first nations to provide first nations communities with drinking water protections comparable to other communities in Canada. However, we found that there is still no regulatory regime in place 15 years after we first recommended it.

The federal government emphasizes the importance of reconciliation and the renewal of a nation-to-nation relationship between Canada and indigenous communities that is based on the recognition of indigenous rights, respect, co-operation and partnership. Indigenous Services Canada must work in partnership with first nations to develop and implement lasting solutions for safe drinking water in first nations communities. This is a key component of reconciliation.

Over the last few decades, many of my predecessors have raised concerns about programs that failed to effectively serve Canada's indigenous peoples. I am very concerned, and honestly disheartened, to find myself reporting a long-standing issue that is still not resolved. Access to safe drinking water is a basic human necessity. I don't believe anyone would say that this situation is in any way acceptable in Canada in 2021.

We made five recommendations to Indigenous Services Canada, and the department has agreed with all of them.

Madam Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Hogan.

We will now go to Ms. Fox for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Christiane Fox (Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Good morning, everyone.

[*Translation*]

I would like to acknowledge before I begin that I am on the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin people.

Thank you to the committee for having me.

The Government of Canada has made it a top priority to ensure that all first nation communities have access to safe, clean and reliable drinking water.

The department has welcomed the Office of the Auditor General of Canada's report on the issue of safe drinking water in first nations communities, and shares her commitment on the issue. The report includes five recommendations, each of which aligns with actions the government is taking to ensure every first nation community has access to clean water.

The department remains committed to implementing the action plan, working in partnership with first nations and following the transformation agenda.

Let me begin by noting that the impact of COVID-19 in the past year cannot be understated. The pandemic has delayed the completion of infrastructure projects across the country, including projects aimed at addressing long-term drinking water advisories. The health and well-being of first nation community members remains our top priority.

First nations are leading the response to protect their communities from COVID-19. In some cases, this has had an effect on getting equipment and resources into communities, especially in remote and northern areas.

The government recently announced significant investments to continue work aimed at lifting long-term drinking water advisories, to continue supporting water and wastewater infrastructure investments, and to support the operation and maintenance of water and wastewater systems.

With the combined investments made as part of budget 2019 and the \$1.5 billion in additional funding announced by the department in December 2020, by 2025, Indigenous Services Canada will have increased the annual funding it provides first nations to support the operation and maintenance of water and wastewater systems by almost four times.

The increase in operations and maintenance funding has already started flowing directly to first nations, with 2020-21 operations and maintenance top-ups having been provided.

In addition, budget 2021 committed \$4.3 billion over four years to support infrastructure projects in first nations, Inuit and Métis Nation communities, and \$1.7 billion over five years to cover the cost of operations and maintenance of community infrastructure in first nations communities on reserve.

● (1110)

[*English*]

Working with indigenous partners, these investments will make significant strides in closing gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, support healthy, safe and prosperous indigenous communities, and advance meaningful reconciliation with first nations, Inuit, and the Métis nation. These investments will support continued action on infrastructure and clean water.

The long-term drinking water advisory commitment was made to address drinking water issues and concerns on reserve. Partnering with first nations, the government has collectively taken a number of important actions that have improved drinking water on reserve.

In November 2015, there were 105 long-term drinking water advisories on public systems on reserves across the country. Since then, 58 long-term drinking water advisories have been added. First nations, with support from Indigenous Services Canada, have lifted 106 long-term drinking water advisories. In addition to that, 179 short-term drinking water advisories at risk of becoming long-term have been lifted, ensuring clean drinking water to first nations.

Initiatives are well under way to address the 52 remaining long-term drinking water advisories in 33 communities.

Long-term solutions are under way in all cases where interim measures were put in place to provide communities with clean drinking water as soon as possible.

The department also continues to support a first nations-led engagement process for the development of that long-term strategy. We will continue to work to ensure that funding is available to commit towards these important water projects and address the long-term needs of communities.

In alignment with the Office of the Auditor General's recommendations, the government will continue to work with first nations to conduct performance inspections of water systems annually and asset condition assessments every three years to identify deficiencies.

Still, we realize more work needs to be done. The government values input from the OAG and other observers, and we will continue to work in concert with first nations partners to improve water infrastructure on reserve and support access to safe, clean and reliable drinking water.

In closing, we remain committed to clean drinking water because it is about building a sustainable foundation that ensures first nations communities have that access to drinking water now and into the future.

*Meegwetch. Nakurmiik. Marsi.* Thank you.

• (1115)

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Fox.

We will now go to our rounds of questioning, starting with our six-minute round.

Mr. Webber, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC):** I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Berthold.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** I want to bring an important point to the witnesses' attention. I think my fellow members will agree with me.

We received the department's action plan only an hour before today's meeting. Frankly, that isn't enough time to properly review the plan, so we may very well ask questions that are already covered in the action plan.

I also want to make the Indigenous Services Canada officials aware that we need more time to consider and examine their answers. I would ask them to bear with us if we ask questions about the action plan, because we likely will.

Madam Clerk, could the committee ask the witnesses and departmental representatives who will be appearing next to adhere to a more reasonable time frame, so we have time to read the action plan before the meeting.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Berthold. I know that our clerk works diligently to get the information that we need to you in a very timely way. As the chair, I take your point as well.

Go ahead, Mr. Webber, for six minutes.

**Mr. Len Webber (Calgary Confederation, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Absolutely, I can concur with Mr. Berthold on that. To get the information sooner would certainly help.

I thank Ms. Hogan and Ms. Fox for their presentations today.

Ms. Fox, you talked a bit about the budget, and that was something that I jumped into. I sifted through the budget and found that on page 265 it says there's "\$1.7 billion over five years to cover operations and maintenance costs of on reserve community infrastructure in First Nations communities." You mentioned the number of billions of dollars going into community infrastructure as well, but that could be a hockey arena or anything other than a water treatment facility.

Page 245 of the budget indicated "new investment of over \$18 billion over the next five years, to improve the quality of life and create new opportunities for people living in Indigenous communities." It also said, "These investments will support continued action on infrastructure", and then mentions "and clean water", which is nice to see in the document. On page 248, it says there's \$125 million over four years, beginning next year, "to continue to support First Nations communities' reliable access to clean water and help ensure the safe delivery of health and social services on reserve."

None of these three points that I bring up really specify what type of money is going directly into water and water treatment. Have you any idea of what money you're getting in this new budget that is targeted specifically for water and water treatment in indigenous first nation communities?

Thanks.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** First, I would say the following. Since 2016 we have invested \$4.27 billion. That is directly to repair water and waste-water infrastructure and support the effective management and maintenance of water systems on reserve. I would also note that in the fall economic statement, there was a commitment that is very specific to water operation and maintenance. In December of 2020, \$1.5 billion was announced. That includes \$616.3 million over six years, with about \$115 million ongoing. That is directly for the operation and maintenance of water infrastructure in communities. That money is very dedicated to that activity. We have a series of budget announcements over the last five years that have very specific and direct funding for water infrastructure.

With respect to budget 2021, you are correct that there is \$4.3 billion dedicated to infrastructure, but it's infrastructure at large, and it is distinctions-based. We will have to work with first nations leadership, the Inuit and the Métis nation to have a distinctions-based strategy in order to dedicate funding to infrastructure priorities. In that there will be water infrastructure.

I would say that in terms of the very specific funding that I think will have a huge impact on our ability, it's this O and M money that we received in both budget 2019 and the fall economic statement that really allows us to pursue the important work of the critical infrastructure as well as the operation and maintenance training needs of communities to be able to respond. It's about getting the systems in, but it's also about getting the expertise to manage the system and to monitor the system. That can really be about job creation. It's about the transformation agenda whereby first nations leadership and the community can take ownership of that water system. We want to work very closely with them on that.

With regard to the \$18 billion dedicated to indigenous priorities, that touches the next year of COVID supports that will continue. It touches health transformation, anti-racism, infrastructure, governance; it's kind of a long list. We'll be working with our partners to work through budget 2021 and marry it with previous investments with, as I said, a starting point of over \$4.2 billion for water infrastructure.

• (1120)

**Mr. Len Webber:** Great.

You mentioned that this is a huge amount of money, obviously. It's \$4.2 billion. Do you think that is a sufficient amount of money to alleviate the problems in these first nations communities and reserves?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** I think we have seen over the last few years a continued commitment towards addressing these water challenges. This has not been an exercise of just lifting drinking water advisories. Obviously, that is a very focused part of our department and our mandate, but really it's about that long-term strategy.

Will more investments be required into the future? I can't say that this is enough to solve everything forever, but I think what we're seeing is dedicated funding for infrastructure and, in addition to that, for operation and maintenance. I can't stress how important that is, especially as we look at new technologies in water. How do we sustain the shifts and the advancements to have better operating systems in communities?

We will keep working through it with communities, with first nations leaders, to see what solutions work for their communities and how we can empower them and support them in making the right decisions.

I would just note that a big part of the focus in this—

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Sorry.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry. We are over time.

**Mr. Len Webber:** Thank you, Ms. Fox.

**The Chair:** Perhaps you could make your observation in another answer.

We will now go to Mr. Longfield for six minutes.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.):** Thank you.

Perhaps Ms. Fox could complete her thought there. It's along the lines of some of the questioning I had as well.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Okay. Thank you.

We have a program here at Indigenous Services Canada called the circuit rider training program—namely, how do we actually develop the skill set within communities to develop a workforce that can do that very important operation and maintenance? Through that program, we try to develop that skill and capability and provide the tools required for communities to manage their projects. We work with first nations leaders and communities directly as well as with other organizations. How can we empower youth through skills, learning and training so that they can be part of the solution? How can we empower women so that they can be part of the solution?

I would just note that this program, with the O and M funding we got, can really expand and build. It has that reliability over the long term.

• (1125)

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** Thank you.

You mentioned the women. Quite often in indigenous communities the women are the water watchers, the ones who take care of the water. It's important to have them involved, as well as the youth.

I'm thinking of a round table I had with some grand chiefs in my last term at the beginning of all this. I remember Chief Madahbee saying to us, "We need operating and maintenance." There was another comment from another grand chief who said, "We're getting these systems given to us from Ottawa, but they're not the right systems. You're not listening to our elders. You're putting septic fields where we know there are flood plains. If you would work with us, we could tell you better solutions." One treatment plant actually added contaminants to the water because it wasn't being maintained properly. That was one of the examples, so there's the whole training piece.

Could you comment, Ms. Fox, on the importance of nation-to-nation discussions, and how they're actually very practical in terms getting to the right solutions at the right time to serve the communities in the way they want to be served?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Thank you for that question.

I think it is absolutely a foundational part of our work. It can't be about the federal government coming in and giving solutions or prescribing one particular system over another. It has to be about partnership and about indigenous leadership making decisions that are best for their communities.

We've really tried to take a community-by-community approach. Through our action plan, we really try to have the communities tell us what their needs are and what some of their priorities are. That can't be unique to water. As you know, when we have conversations with leadership, there are other priorities they address. How do we empower them?

I think the decision-making is key. It's not for us to lift a long-term drinking water advisory. It's not for us to prescribe a contractor. It's not for us to decide on the systems. We really want to support, and that support has to come with funding. It has to come with a commitment to work in partnership, but ultimately we want indigenous leaders and first nations leaders within communities to make the decisions that are best for their communities, and we are there to support them in doing that.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** That is why our budgets are increasing as we find different needs, things that we maybe didn't consider, that they're bringing forward to us.

I wanted to touch on the band council resolutions. Band councils will come to us with resolutions, particularly during COVID, and say, "We really don't want you in our community. We'll tell you when you can come in." That has limited some of our construction projects and changed some of our schedules.

Could you talk about the process of band councils giving us resolutions and how we're respecting those resolutions?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Absolutely. That's an excellent question.

COVID-19 obviously has been our number one priority in this department over the last year. We have been working in lockstep with indigenous leaders to partner with them and to support them in the very important decisions they make to protect their communities.

Band council resolutions are a way that they demonstrate to us that they've made a decision about the safety and security of their

communities. That has sometimes meant a shutdown of the community. They've requested some supports at times for perimeter security to manage the flow in and out of their communities, and at times it was the difference between the protection of a community against an outbreak in order to have a healthy community.

We have been very responsive to band council resolutions to respect the decisions that indigenous leaders have made. That has meant that some of the construction season of last year was impacted. It was impacted not just because of those decisions, which were very important as we face a third wave in this country and have to be extremely vigilant in how we manage it, but also in terms of just getting equipment in and out.

As a department, we have to think about how we manage both the pandemic response and the support we're giving to communities in the summer season coming up, while trying to advance some of these very important water projects and other infrastructure projects.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** Okay, thanks.

I have quick one in terms of retaining the operators that we're training.

Up in the NAN at Sioux Lookout, they have been losing operators to the local paper mill, which was paying more money. What are we doing to try to retain operators?

• (1130)

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** At the end of day, it's definitely up to the first nations leadership to decide on the salary structure for operator salaries. What the operation and maintenance funding does is provide more money to communities. It provides 100% in terms of that formula we have in order to fully support O and M in communities. As a result of this funding, communities are empowered to pay salaries that are greater than what they had been, and then retain that talent, retain that skill and develop it. I think that's part of the strategy, absolutely.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** Thank you very much.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Fox.

We will now go to Mr. Blanchette-Joncas for six minutes.

[Translation]

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome to the witnesses.

Good morning, Ms. Hogan. It's always a pleasure to see you.

I have to tell you that, back in February, I almost felt sick when I read your report. I have that same feeling today; it came back as I listened to your opening statement. Your findings are appalling. Indigenous Services Canada is very slack, it would seem.

I won't beat around the bush. Instead, I will get straight to the point. Before we get into the details, I want to discuss some of your findings and recommendations. You pointed out that your office first conducted an audit on the specific issue of access to drinking water more than 15 years ago, back in 2005. The department has had time to get things ready. It's safe to say that the issue has been on your office's radar for almost 20 years.

My question is straightforward. Do you feel the department takes the role of the Office of the Auditor General seriously?

Do you think the department has a corporate culture of offering up mea culpas every five, 10 or 15 years? In other words, is it just riding out the storm, while carrying on business as usual until the auditor general's next report comes out?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** You're right.

We conducted an audit on safe drinking water in indigenous communities in 2005. We followed up in 2011, and again just recently, as per the report tabled in the House of Commons in February.

Although progress has been made during that time, the department did not meet its commitment to lift all drinking water advisories. We found two things in particular during this audit: a regulatory regime had not been developed, and more importantly, the funding formula had not been updated for some 30 years.

As a result, the funding formula is outdated and does not meet the immediate needs. We found that it had not kept pace with advances in technology, which has a direct impact on water system operator capacity. Despite the progress that has been made, the department's failure to update the formula since it was developed some 30 years ago is not the way to ensure adequate funding for operation and maintenance.

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you for that clarification, Ms. Hogan.

I realize you can't speak as freely as I can about what is obvious to both of us, so I will rephrase my question.

Your office conducted an audit in 2005 and another one in 2011. You submitted a report this year. Yet again, you are disappointed with the lack of significant progress. It's clear that the department's actions do not necessarily live up to the promise the government made to first nations. Every single time, you have made clear and specific recommendations. Despite agreeing with those recommendations, the department has never managed to implement them once and for all.

I would be willing to accept the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse, but the government's commitment dates back to 2015. There was no pandemic then. I realize that it did slow things down, but it does not account for the extent of the failings identified in your report.

Mentally, do you feel assured that this is the last time you will have to prod the department like this, or is it a lost cause?

Your office produces reports, they end up on some shelf and you have to do it all over again every five, 10 or 15 years.

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** It grieves me to see that the problem still hasn't been fixed. It is a long-standing issue, so I can't give you any assurances.

The deputy minister can speak to the department's commitment on the matter. I can promise, however, that we will be watching.

Making sure every community in the country has access to safe drinking water is paramount. I hope I'm not back here in a few years having to report the same shortcomings. It is really incumbent on the government and the department to keep their commitment and to work with first nations communities.

• (1135)

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you, Ms. Hogan.

I would like to discuss the fact that the risk ratings for water infrastructure remained unchanged; that was one of your findings based on the risk assessments.

In the 2014-15 fiscal year, the department's annual assessment revealed that 304 of the 699 assessed water systems, nearly 50%, were either high or medium risk. Five years later, despite the strong commitments that had been made, nothing had changed. In the 2019-20 fiscal year, 306 of the 718 systems were still rated as high or medium risk, so roughly the same percentage.

What must the government and the department do to reduce the risk of major deficiencies in the water systems?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** The department has a program to assess the condition of water systems, which it measures by assigning a risk rating. You're right that the risk ratings have not changed, so approximately 43% of water systems are still assessed as high or medium risk.

That does not necessarily mean water advisories will be issued, but it does point to deficiencies in system maintenance or a lack of qualified and certified water system operators. The department uses it as a barometer.

The situation is a clear sign that the funding formula is outdated. Until it is updated, it will be hard to determine whether the level of funding provided is enough to meet the needs.

The first thing the department should do is update the funding formula so that it takes into account new technologies, gaps and needs. It's not just about operational requirements. It's also about keeping—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Hogan. I'm sorry; I was muted and trying to get your attention.

We will now move to Ms. Ashton for six minutes.

**Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP):** Thank you, Chair.



The Prime Minister and the Minister of Indigenous Services promised to eliminate drinking water advisories on reserves by March 2021. They failed, and it's first nations that are paying the price.

The government has blamed COVID, climate change and everyone but themselves. This type of dishonest and cynical politics helps no one and it certainly doesn't eliminate boil water advisories.

The Auditor General report that we're discussing here today has been clear on the reasons for this failure, and I want to highlight particularly the way they point to the lack of funding to retain staff and the lack of a regulatory regime that still wasn't in place 15 years after it was recommended. Quite simply, this is another example of this government saying the right things but not backing them up with action and the same kind of urgency they give when big oil, for example, needs money for a pipeline.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating for first nations. It has laid bare the lack of investment in first nations communities by successive Liberal and Conservative governments, leaving these communities to fend for themselves. We must do better, and we can do better.

I want to acknowledge that what the Auditor General report has made clear is that first nations need more than just empty words and symbolic commitments when they're consistently left with broken promises, particularly on something as fundamental a basic human right as access to clean drinking water.

First nations need access to clean drinking water immediately. I'm pleased to join you in this committee today to really get at what needs to be done for us to get there, for first nations to see that reality take place.

My first question is to the Auditor General.

I am wondering if you can expand on why a sufficient regulatory regime wasn't in place. I'm thinking of first nations like Garden Hill in our region, which actually is not even on the list of boil water advisories. It is a first nation that received investment for its water treatment plant after the H1N1 crisis, which hit that community hard. However, we know—and this was exposed by a CBC report in 2019—that by the time water gets to homes in the community, it is not drinkable.

How is it that Garden Hill First Nation, and presumably others, have fallen through the cracks and don't even make it to this list? How did we get to this point? What can be done to ensure that communities like Garden Hill get the help that they need?

• (1140)

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** One of our first audits back in 2005 on this issue did raise a concern about a regulatory regime, and we have seen that some progress has been made since then. I think I need to back up just to explain what's in a regulatory regime.

Typically there's an act, which is the legislation and the law, but then there are also guidelines that accompany it. It's those guidelines that really show you how to operationalize.

What we found in this audit is that the act has been in place for a few years, but the guidelines are still not finalized. Many first na-

tions communities, and we noted this in our report, questioned how the act was put together, noting a lack of a meaningful engagement and consultation, and perhaps that's the reason why some of the guidelines are not finalized yet.

Why this is really needed is it helps define roles and responsibilities and provide clear accountability when something goes wrong. It defines minimum service levels in order to be able to identify when water is no longer safe and what advisory needs to be put in place. It's really about ensuring that the first nations communities have the same protections that other communities across the country have, but they have to be able to set that, because they have their right to self-govern. They have to be able to be actively engaged in setting what those regulations should look like. That is one of the key steps, in addition to the funding formula, that's needed in order to help advance this and lift those boil water advisories on a more long-term, sustainable basis.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you.

My next question is to ISC.

We have heard repeatedly, including today, a favourite Liberal buzzword, “partnership”, as in “work in partnership” with first nations. I want to bring up Tataskweyak Cree Nation, which is also in my region. They've struggled without clean drinking water for years, yet ISC, Indigenous Services Canada, wasn't even testing their water for the contaminants that were making people sick, forcing the first nation to pay out of pocket for the work that ISC refused to do. Due to Canada's failures, they launched a class action lawsuit and have spoken about their fear of government reprisals for doing this.

They're now taking their complaint to the UN, and I'm proud to support their efforts in doing so, but it didn't need to come to this. When asked about these failures, a spokesperson for ISC said, “Indigenous Services Canada...has supported the community in the repairs and upgrades to their water treatment centre to ensure water quality continues to meet approved guidelines.” The water that makes them sick continues to meet approved guidelines.

This type of disrespect is far too common. In a meeting between ISC and Tataskweyak Cree Nation in their community, an ISC official took a sip of water to demonstrate that the water was clean, seemingly ignoring the many community members who had rashes or were otherwise sick.

Does water that you won't test properly, that we know makes people sick, continue to meet approved guidelines? If yes, why is ISC maintaining that these guidelines are accurate? What good do they serve outside of public perception? We know that the first nation has been clear that the water makes them sick. Why is ISC continuing this charade?

**The Chair:** I am very sorry, but we have gone over your time. Perhaps, Ms. Ashton, we can come back to get an answer during your next round of questioning. Thank you.

We will move on to our five-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Berthold.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to give the witnesses a heads-up: I'll be asking a lot of questions, so it would be appreciated if they could keep their answers as brief as possible. That will help us get the answers we are looking for.

Ms. Hogan, in your audit, you did not assess the impact of the long-term drinking water advisories on the health of the affected populations.

Was that deliberate? Is that something you could have examined?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** You're right. That wasn't part of our audit.

We could have hired health experts to help us with that assessment, but we felt it was more important to focus on what the federal government had done to meet its March 31 target.

• (1145)

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Had the report contained real data on the health of individuals who had experienced the long-term effects, perhaps it would push the government to respond more quickly. That's a suggestion for your next audit. It could save us another 15-year wait before seeing further results.

You weren't able to visit first nations communities because of the pandemic. Might that have changed your findings?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** When we conduct an audit involving first nations, we usually like to visit communities to gain a better understanding of the problems, and to identify the needs and concerns. It may have changed how we interacted with first nations communities, but I don't think it would have changed our audit findings.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** For the second time in two weeks, you have said you were disheartened. I just want that to be clear, Ms. Hogan.

Ms. Fox, was your department consulted in 2015 when the government came out and said that it was going to fix all the problems by 2021?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** I wasn't with the department then. I started in September 2020, so I don't know whether the subject was discussed in 2015.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Would you be able to get back to the committee with that answer? I'm interested in finding out about any advice that may have been issued on the likelihood of achieving the target.

When I was a mayor, the city had to deal with a drinking water issue. It took 10 years to fix, so I find it hard to believe that the government thought it could actually identify and fix all of the problems that existed in 2015 by 2021.

I just received the department's detailed action plan. What is your new target date for eliminating all the short- and long-term drinking water advisories?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Thank you for your question.

I should point out that the plan has to take into account not just long-term advisories, but also short-term advisories.

A total of 179 short-term advisories have been lifted.

Under our strategy, the action plan targets long-term situations.

We are being very transparent about the work we are doing to address the existing advisories in the 33 communities. The details of the work and the progress made are all posted on a public website, because—

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Forgive me for interrupting, but I just wanted to know—

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** You wanted to know whether we had a target date, did you not?

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Yes, precisely.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** I can't give an exact date because, as you pointed out, some things can be planned in advance of a specific deadline, but others can be delayed. What I can tell you is that the department is 100% ready to work with all 33 communities to eliminate the long-term advisories.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** My understanding is that, as a politician, in government or anywhere, it's very risky to set a deadline for an issue of this nature, which involves so many variables. It can take twice as long to build a plant in some parts of Canada than in areas near ports and equipment.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** True, but setting a goal sometimes gets people engaged and motivated to work towards it. The department is continuing to work with the goal of meeting the deadlines. We still have work to do.

The minister said in November that we wouldn't meet the deadline. However, I think that we're in a good position to fulfil our goal, given our funding, the team in place, our relationship with the communities, the partnership created and the transparency of our approach.

There's work to be done and we're being challenged, but we want to work in a partnership.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** So, all this—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. That is the end of your time, Mr. Berthold.

We will move on to Mr. Sorbara for five minutes.

**Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair

Thank you to the Auditor General for the report.

I have lot of questions.

Just to Mr. Berthold's earlier comment, I spent a lot of time last night reading through all the documents, including Mr. Webber's comments on the funds and programs that we've committed to the indigenous community across Canada in the budget that we recently introduced. I'm very happy to see the continuing investments, of course. I would have loved to have received this detailed action plan last night to have been able to review it a little more extensively. I have gone through it now, so I'm going to go to that right now.

Just on the O and M side, is the 100% commitment in the funding formula in place today for the indigenous communities?

• (1150)

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Yes, it is in place today.

**Mr. Francesco Sorbara:** Okay, so there's no cost-sharing, as in municipal, provincial or federal sharing. Is it all in place?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Correct.

**Mr. Francesco Sorbara:** Thank you.

In paragraph 2.3, where you break out a number of items in numerical amounts, what is the annual commitment to O and M? It's going to be growing as more water advisories are lifted and more water treatment plants and purification systems come online, so I would love to know what the annual commitment is if someone could come back with that. I was trying to go through the numbers and I would love to get to where it says what we are spending and investing in ensuring that indigenous communities have safe and clean water systems.

That's great to hear, because that is a big thing that was pointed out in the AG's report.

Second, holistically, with the budget commitment that we recently introduced, approximately \$42 billion is being invested into the indigenous communities across Canada, so it's great to see that, and I just wanted to point that out. That includes the \$11 billion from the prior government.

On the payments to the individuals running the water treatment plants, is that a decision by each of the indigenous communities themselves to make, or is that in partnership with the federal government?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** In terms of the water operators and the salaries for the water operators, it is the decision of the communities to make and to establish the rates. However, obviously, with the increase in O and M that we can give to the communities, they have the ability to have competitive salaries in their communities.

To answer your question around the yearly basis, in 2021 O and M is \$338 million, I believe, and by 2025 we're going to be at about \$400 million per year on O and M.

**Mr. Francesco Sorbara:** In regard to the contracting, putting out the bid and the request for proposal for these treatment plants, obviously there is an economies of scale perspective. Does that happen from the federal government and it is then turned over to the indigenous community so that each indigenous community doesn't have to develop its own expertise in order to do this? Is it done through a partnership? Can you describe that process?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Yes, absolutely. Thank you for the question.

It definitely is a partnership process. At the federal government, we do not want to be selecting contractors for indigenous communities. We would like the indigenous leadership to make those choices. However, we do want to work with them. If they require supports, information or additional capacity to work with contractors, we're absolutely prepared to do that, but at the end of the day we really want them to be making the decisions that are best for them.

**Mr. Francesco Sorbara:** I am a numbers person. I like to think about the world in that sort of sense. On page 4 of your introductory remarks, you said there were 105 long-term drinking water advisories in November 2015. Obviously, more have been added as we go along, and some have been taken off. There were 106 lifted.

When we introduce interim measures, which obviously mean that water can be consumed, and so forth, are they lifted and then counted as lifted advisories, or are they put in a separate bucket of projects that are still ongoing? How do we account for that when we use interim measures?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** If there is an interim measure, yes, it could lift the water advisory. What we try to do is work with communities to make sure that if the interim measures are in place and we lift the advisory, we still work with them on the longer-term solution. I think what this additional funding allows is for us to do that work with them.

**Mr. Francesco Sorbara:** Okay.

Finally, on the resources dedicated to lifting all the water advisories, obviously COVID-19 has delayed many things on the construction side, even in terms of going to certain communities because we don't want the COVID-19 virus or any of the variants there, but are the resources sufficient to lift the remaining long-term water advisories?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Yes. We have a long-term commitment of funding of O and M. It's for capital infrastructure and for O and M funding, and I would say that the O and M funding is key because it allows us to track and monitor and avoid deficiencies in the long term.

**Mr. Francesco Sorbara:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Sorbara.

We will now go to our two-and-a-half-minute round, starting with Mr. Blanchette-Joncas.

• (1155)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first questions are for Ms. Fox.

Good morning and welcome to the committee, Ms. Fox.

I suppose that it isn't very pleasant for you to appear before the Standing Committee on Public Accounts today. We know that the Auditor General tabled a less than glowing report in Parliament on your organization's work to meet the basic need of providing safe drinking water to indigenous communities. This basic need is more than vital. You'll agree that the report speaks for itself.

I know that some progress has been made and that many initiatives have been put in place to address the issue. I just want you to clearly state whether you find it acceptable that, for over 10 years, communities have had to boil their water on a daily basis before consuming it.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Through its action plan, the department is committed to ensuring the elimination of all long-term advisories so that people can access safe drinking water. This drives us to take action and continue the work. We want to ensure that communities aren't under advisories. We completely agree that all Canadians should have access to safe drinking water.

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** I understand, Ms. Fox, but 10 years is a long time. I still find it difficult to read all the findings of the Office of the Auditor General. Most campgrounds provide better service than the services available to some indigenous communities.

I'm trying to understand. I agree that the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down some activities. However, at what point did your department already know, even at the start of the pandemic, that the work would slow down significantly?

In December 2020, the government offered a mea culpa to mitigate the situation before the submission of the Auditor General's report. The government knew that the report would be scathing. I can't imagine that you didn't know about this until December 2020. The pandemic had been going on for almost a year.

When did your department realize that the pandemic would slow down some of your ongoing work?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** I think that it should be noted—

[English]

**The Chair:** I'm sorry. It's going to have to be very short answer.

[Translation]

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** It is important to note that in March 2020, the department was beginning to think about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We did a reassessment, over the summer, when the second wave seemed to be diminishing. We thought that a decrease in cases would allow us to begin work.

However, the arrival of the third wave in September and October had a much more pronounced impact in indigenous communities. We were thinking about acceleration strategies, but when we saw the number of cases and closures in the fall, we realized that we were not going to meet the timeline.

[English]

**The Chair:** Ms. Ashton, you have two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you.

I'd like to ask Indigenous Services Canada to respond to the reality of Tataskweyak Cree Nation. Again, here's my question. The

first nation has been clear that the water in their community is undrinkable, yet ISC maintains that guidelines are being met. If yes, why are you maintaining guidelines and what good are they if they are making people sick?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** First of all, you raised a question in your last intervention around whether or not we would penalize people who are taking legal action. I would say categorically no, we would not. We respect the right of indigenous groups to take the decisions that they need to take for their communities.

In terms of the water, the guidelines we have are based on science, and we want to work in lockstep with communities. If people feel that the water is unsafe, not only will we do the testing, but we will also work with our environmental health officers and look at what we can do.

If there are things happening in the community that require health interventions, it also becomes not just a water issue; it becomes the health supports for that community. We would continue to provide support based on science for the guidelines, but also, in recognition that something is happening, we want to work in partnership with the leadership to address that.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Well, I would urge you to do so. Something is happening, and the first nation has made it clear that going to court is not their number one choice. What they want is clean drinking water now. Let's be honest: Canada is able to deliver that. Political will is what we need to see.

I want to go back to the Auditor General and ask her about another first nation in our region, Shamattawa.

Shamattawa First Nation has had a long-term boil water advisory, a housing crisis and a tuberculosis outbreak, and was on the national news because of its devastating COVID-19 outbreak before Christmas. It was so serious that the military had to step in, in full force. Few communities in this country have had to bear the brunt of Canada's failures like Shamattawa First Nation.

Can you expand on how the housing crisis in particular affects a community's capacity to deliver safe drinking water and what needs to be done to get at these crises together?

● (1200)

**The Chair:** Could we have a very short answer, Ms. Hogan?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** I guess what I would add to that really quickly is that we have studied all of these issues that many first nations face. When there is a housing crisis, there is overcrowding in homes and, as we've seen throughout the pandemic, that just makes situations worse.

The only thing I would say about drinking water is that the public systems are those that serve five houses or more. There are so many systems in first nations reserves that are operated by first nations or by the homeowner, and this is where training is so important, so that the communities can take care of drinking water in all their systems going forward, not just the public ones.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Ashton.

We will now go to our next round of questions. It's a five-minute round, and we're starting with Mr. Lawrence.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence (Northumberland—Peterborough South, CPC):** Thank you very much.

My first question will be for the Auditor General. I just want to make sure that I understood something. I want to clarify it.

It seems 43% of the systems are at risk. Is that correct? Also, what exactly does “at risk” mean?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** The reference is to a process that Indigenous Services Canada has whereby they do an annual risk assessment of the state of a water system, and 43% of them have been rated as high or medium risk, meaning that they likely haven't had their maintenance done or they perhaps don't have trained operators.

There's a set of criteria that allows the department to rate the state of a system. Forty-three per cent of them have rated “high”, which is an indication that perhaps there will be water advisories. It's at least an indication that you need to pay attention to those systems because maintenance is likely not happening the way it should be happening.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** One thing that came across in the report to me, and maybe you can confirm this or correct me, is that it seemed that you were a little concerned that the government was focusing too much, perhaps, on getting short-term solutions, but not focusing on the long term, such as making sure there were enough operators, etc. Is that a correct thing to be pulling out from your report?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** We did highlight in the report that many of the long-term drinking water advisories that were lifted were lifted by interim measures. We did note, however, that some of those systems had long-term plans, but that they would not be in place until about 2024 or 2025. Just lifting an advisory doesn't mean you've fixed the underlying issue, and that's why it's not a cookie-cutter approach across communities. Each community needs to have its unique long-term sustainable solution, and we shouldn't just be focusing on lifting advisories, but on getting those long-term solutions in place.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** To be clear, I think this as well was pulled out in the other question, but I want to make sure I have it right. In 2015, 43% of the systems were high risk, and in 2020, there were also 43% that were high-risk systems. Is that correct, or do I have that incorrect?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** For high or medium risk, you have that correct at 43%.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** Okay.

I know everyone here, especially including the folks who are senior bureaucrats, want to make sure this is taken care of. One thing

has bothered me a little bit. I saw a dissonance between your report and the reaction of Ms. Fox. You used the harshest language I've seen so far in any of your reports when you said “disheartened”. What degree of confidence do you have in the government eventually eliminating all drinking advisories, as I know everyone here desperately wants to have happen?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** I'll say that I'm disheartened for first nations communities because so many of us across the country take for granted that when this meeting's over, we're going to walk over to the tap to pour ourselves a glass of water, and so many communities can't do that. That's really what saddens me about all of this.

I can't give you assurances. I do think that's where the department needs to demonstrate, through their action plans and the updating of the funding formula, that they're going to work in collaboration with first nations communities to address this issue and not just, as I mentioned earlier, focus on lifting long-term or short-term drinking water advisories but on finding those long-term sustainable solutions and making sure that first nations have adequately trained operators and good long-term operating and maintenance funding.

• (1205)

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** Thank you.

I'll go over to you, Ms. Fox. I will let you comment on the Auditor General's comments right there. Rest assured that I believe 110% that your intentions are good and that you work, I'm sure, hours and hours to try to solve these issues, but I see a dissonance and I'm not sure why. Do you realize the issue here and why Canadians are concerned?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Absolutely, I realize the issue. Absolutely, I am committed to it, and absolutely, the department is committed to it. There is no doubt.

The conversations that we are having with our partners and also with the OAG take very seriously the recommendations that they've brought to us and how it can help inform the way forward. We have a responsibility to do this well and over the long term, and this department's mandate is to actually transform all of our services into the leadership of indigenous communities. To do that, we have to get ourselves ready for that transformation and empower indigenous leaders to take on a system that is fully operational and running well.

There is no doubt that we are 100% committed to this. We have regular discussions with the partners within our team to make sure we are making progress, that we are working collectively to make a difference, that we are—

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. We are over time.

We will now move to the next questioner, Mr. Blois, for five minutes.

**Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.):** I'm going to pass my time to Ms. Yip, but I'll come back in the next round, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, everyone, for all your hard work on this topic. I always feel particularly saddened that our own indigenous communities do not have the same rights to safe drinking water as the rest of us, so this is important work.

My first question is to Ms. Hogan. It concerns your comments about feeling “disheartened” about these programs. What do you think is the most important recommendation?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** I want to tell you that all of our recommendations are important recommendations. I do think addressing the funding formula is a key one, being able to ensure that there's a stable base of funding not only for building the infrastructure but also for its operation and maintenance. You can have a state-of-the-art facility, but if you don't maintain it, eventually there's going to be a problem down the road. That operating and maintenance funding is linked to the ability of first nations communities to attract and retain trained and certified water system operators, and also to have a backup operator.

What we found in our audit is there were many systems—I think 26%—that lacked a trained and certified operator, and then 56% lacked a backup operator. Those are really fundamental to maintaining access to safe drinking water. If I had to pick one out of all of them, I would focus in on that funding formula to make sure that it's updated and meets the needs and new technologies that communities need.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Do you think that there are enough resources or thought put into having these maintenance contracts to ensure that these water operators will be there and be continually trained, and perhaps have outside support come as well to do more training and support?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** I believe that's why one of my comments earlier on was that until the funding formula is updated, it's difficult to determine if the additional commitment of funding will be sufficient to meet the current needs of the first nations communities. I think it's also something that will need to be monitored going forward. It's not going to be a one-and-done solution to make sure that the ongoing maintenance and operating funding is adjusted. Currently it's only adjusted for inflation, but not for other things, and that's why that funding formula update is pretty key to helping support the solution for this situation.

• (1210)

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Did the OAG work with the first nations leadership for this audit at all?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** During our planning we did have some conversations with first nations communities. As we mentioned earlier, we try to always visit them, but because of the pandemic we were unable to do that. We have some difficulties trying to do so virtually with them, but it is always our objective to make sure that we consider the points and opinions of first nations communities whenever we do any audit work that affects them.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Were you able to speak to any of the band leaders?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** I think I'm going to ask Glenn Wheeler to talk about that since he would have been there from start to finish, and he'd be able to give you more details on it.

**Mr. Glenn Wheeler (Principal, Office of the Auditor General):** No, we were unable to speak to individual first nations during this audit, as the Auditor General has mentioned. We typically do that, but the reality is that a lot of first nations were dealing with COVID and the impact of COVID during the time period of our audit and it didn't make sense for us to do that detailed work or consultation we would typically do with first nations. We did speak with the Assembly of First Nations, however, and some of their experts to get their views on water.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** It wasn't possible to do virtual meetings with them?

**Mr. Glenn Wheeler:** It wasn't possible in this audit. However, when we did some earlier planning before COVID—we did long-term planning on where to focus future audit work—we did visit a number of first nations and their water treatment plants and spoke to their water treatment operators and their band managers to get a sense of what the issues were, but that was before we formally started this audit.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Ms. Fox, how many short-term water advisories are there, and how can the department prevent these short-term water advisories from becoming long-term ones?

**The Chair:** I will need you to provide a very short answer, please.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** The time goes fast.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** I was just looking at my chart. We've lifted 179 short-term advisories, and then I'm going to have to get you the precise number for the active ones. I don't want to mislead you. I'll get you the precise number of how many short-term are active right now.

**Ms. Jean Yip:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** I'm sorry; it's nine. Nine is the answer. It's here.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Yip.

We will now go to our next round of questioning, which is six minutes, starting with Mr. Lawrence.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** Thank you very much.

I want to go back to you, Ms. Fox, in the line of questioning we were on.

We had the pledge to have all drinking water advisories done initially by this spring. What is the recalibrated goal, now that the government has acknowledged that obviously we won't be achieving that goal?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** As I mentioned, there are 33 communities that still have 52 long-term drinking water advisories. We're going to continue to work very closely with them.

What we're looking at in the short term is what kind of progress can be made over the next few months, especially taking into account the spring and summer construction. Obviously, with COVID still very present in a number of communities, we're looking to see what can and can't be done and what types of security measures could be put in place by way of rapid testing and other types of supports that we could provide, if communities decide that they want to proceed with construction or maintenance.

I can tell you that we remain committed to it. I can tell you that we have an action plan for each of the 33 communities, but it would be premature for me to put a time frame on this today, given that we're still living in the midst of COVID.

I really want to make sure that we have conversations with first nations and that they tell us when they feel that it's the right time to adjust or fix or build, or whatever process and step they're in.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** Thank you, Ms. Fox.

On the bigger scale, as I discussed with the AG, we were at 43% being at high or medium risk. Will we, in the next five years, get down to zero? Everyone here wants to get to zero, and I know probably you most of all want to get there.

We need to know for the indigenous communities out there when we will be at zero for high- to medium-risk situations.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** First of all, it might be helpful for the committee to know that in terms of the risk rating, we look at very specific points for the risk rating of a system: the water source, the system design, the system operation and maintenance, the operator training and certification, and the record keeping and reporting. Those are the high-level metrics by which we measure a high-risk or a medium-risk system.

As we look at the recommendations of the OAG and at the budget investments over the last cycles, we have to see how we address these so that we bring the number down.

The high-risk number has come down. High risk right now is at about 15% of projects, and you noted the 43% figure for high and medium. As we look at long-term solutions and not interim solutions, we see fewer projects of a high-risk nature. As we look at more funding for operators and maintenance and they're active in the communities, we again reduce the risk factor.

We'll continue to monitor.

• (1215)

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** Thank you.

I'm concerned. I understand that your intentions are good, but words like "commitment" and "engagement" and "investments" don't cut it for people who right now cannot get clean water. We need commitments in terms of times and deadlines, etc.

On that note, I'd like to cede the rest of my time to Ms. Ashton for her questioning, as I think it's been great and critical.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you very much to my colleague for that.

My question is to the Auditor General. I want to raise the issue of Red Sucker Lake.

Red Sucker Lake has a water treatment plant that was constructed in 1995. We know that the infrastructure in Red Sucker Lake First Nation to deliver dependable clean drinking water is simply not where it needs to be. In fact, when Red Sucker Lake was dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak before the end of December, it took the Canadian Forces to come in and identify clearly that having only one water truck to service the community was not only not adequate but was actually contributing to making people sick with COVID-19.

These are catastrophic implications. The AG report referred to how, in many cases, ISC seemed to rely on short-term solutions such as water trucks—and not enough of them—to solve water advisories. What we saw with Red Sucker Lake is that this is not what's needed.

What is keeping Indigenous Services Canada from making the investments necessary to ensure that communities don't have to rely on unsafe water practices, as in the case of Red Sucker Lake?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** I acknowledge that when so many communities have to deal with short-term and long-term drinking water advisories and all these temporary measures, they lose confidence in their water system, and that is definitely something that needs to be reversed and addressed.

All I can tell you is what we found in our audit, which showed the department's lack of the ability to meet its commitment. I linked it to the lack of a regulatory regime and issues with the funding formula, and hence inappropriate funding to those communities.

Your more pointed question, as to why it has taken so long to address those matters, will have to go to the department.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Let's turn it to the department.

In the case of Red Sucker Lake, why has it taken so long—and frankly, the presence of the Canadian Forces—to say that what they're facing is downright unsafe?

**The Chair:** Give a very short answer, please.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** In situations like Shamattawa and Red Sucker Lake, in COVID we have been working in lockstep with community leadership to support them during this pandemic. As you noted, COVID has pointed to the lack of housing and some of the other socio-economic gaps that exist.

We are committed to working with Red Sucker Lake and Shamattawa and to using these investments to address long-term solutions for the community.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Ashton.

We will now go to Mr. Blois for six minutes.

**Mr. Kody Blois:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for their testimony today.

Obviously, this is a very serious situation. It has a lot of legacy, as we know from the Auditor General's report. I look to exhibit 3.2 in the hopes that we are making a difference. I know that's cold comfort to communities that don't yet have access to clean drinking water, but there has been marked improvement. Our hope is that we can continue with this work to be able to get there.

My first question is to Ms. Fox.

Help me understand the role of Indigenous Services Canada as it relates to the operation and the actual capital on indigenous communities. I know some indigenous communities use own-source revenue. They have some of their own operations internally. Is the expectation that the federal government provides 100% of the necessary capital, or is there some working partnership there at all?

• (1220)

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Thank you for the question.

I think it's really important to flag what the role of Indigenous Services Canada is. The role is actually to work with leadership of indigenous communities to make determinations about what they need to support their communities.

Sometimes water is at the top of that list, for very obvious reasons. Sometimes there are other priorities. It could be a school construction build or a housing project. Rather than sort of dictate, we have to listen and ask what those priorities are that they have identified.

Yes, there may be some communities that say they would use own-source revenue to do various types of infrastructure, but I think our commitment to first nations communities for water infrastructure is that we can provide 100% of the capital. We can provide that 100% for O and M to allow them to do those projects in the quickest way possible and from a long-term perspective, but it is a partnership, so the decision can't come from our department. The decision has to come from the first nations leadership.

That's how we guide our work. It's for eventual full transformation.

**Mr. Kody Blois:** Okay.

I want to take you to exhibit 3.3, Ms. Fox, where we have somewhere between 15 to 20 long-term advisories that have been in place for 15 years or longer, if I read the graph correctly.

Intrinsically, to me this is not necessarily just a money issue. This is capacity. This is geography. There are a whole host of things. I know that even in my own riding in Nova Scotia, there are communities that, because of colonization, were located in areas and terrains that were not desired. Is it fair to say that in some of the communities, part of this issue with some of these long-term advisories is actually finding quality water to provide to the community, or is it just the infrastructure? Can you speak to that a little bit?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** I think there are real complexities with some of these systems. It does not take away from the importance of doing it and for the quick action that is required to address them.

Where a first nation community is located in the country will have an impact on the water source, the availability of contractors, the availability of people to get up there. There's a different scale. There are some that are probably easier in nature than others, but absolutely there are different levels of complexities.

**Mr. Kody Blois:** I want to go to paragraph 3.38. I think you might have touched on this with Mr. Lawrence, but it's just so I'm sure.

At that point in November 2020, there were 60. There was a commitment to try to eliminate at least 33. Did I hear that 27 have been eliminated since November 2020? Is that fair?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Were 27 eliminated since November? No, not quite. I believe that in the November report, about 96 had been lifted, and as of March there were 106. Those are the data points that I have in terms of lifts.

**Mr. Kody Blois:** Maybe I could ask for a submission, because I don't want to spend too much more time. Paragraph 3.38 in the Auditor General's report says that as of November 20, there were still 60 in effect and that the department thought that up to 33 would be eliminated by March 31, 2021.

If you could get that information to the committee, I would certainly appreciate it.

The Auditor General's report, Ms. Fox, also talks about how one-third of water that's used in communities is not through the public utility model, in the sense that it is coming from wells and other sources. I know that's generally the domain of the local indigenous community.

As quickly as you can, is there any programming in place there? Is it part of your mandate and that of the department to support outcomes in that space?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** The focus is on public utility. If ever there would be conversations about needs outside of that, we are always talking to communities about their needs, but the program is focused on public utility.

**Mr. Kody Blois:** Thank you.

I want to go to the Auditor General.



Ms. Hogan, we've talked a lot about regulations, and I've had the chance to look through the actual legislation from 2013. With respect, it's relatively straightforward, and it's a relatively short act. Why is it that regulations matter?

You talk about policies, and I don't even think the department is in disagreement, but help me understand, as a parliamentarian, why regulations matter, especially if we're looking to try to address things.

You know, even ministers then have to gazette. They have to amend regulations. Why can't this just be a set policy in working with indigenous communities? Why does it have to be in regulatory form to be the most effective?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** I'm not a lawyer, but I'm going to do my best at explaining why all of this matters.

The act, as you say, is rather short. That's the legislative framework, and the regulations are really how you operationalize that. They will set, then, the minimum standards, the minimal threshold for water. They will set defined service levels, defined accountabilities when something goes wrong, such as who needs to take action. It's really how you operationalize the legislative framework that's outlined in the act. That's the fundamentals. That's needed because first nations communities need that hook, like every other community, in order to make sure that they know what level to target and what to do when those standards aren't met. It is just a fundamental way to give the same protections that the rest of the country has.

• (1225)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

**Mr. Kody Blois:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** We will now go on to Mr. Blanchette-Joncas for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Fox, there has been some discussion about how things are going. I listened carefully to you when you talked about transparency and collaboration. Those are all good things. We really hope that the action plan, as well as all the recommendations in it, that you accept today will bear fruit.

I am trying to get a better understanding of what the collaboration is all about. The report notes that there are problems with the legislative framework. In particular, a lack of consultation is mentioned. Drawing a parallel between consultation and collaboration is self-evident. The lack of collaboration and consultation goes back to the design of the Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act in 2013. Eight years later, no changes have been made.

How do you explain the fact that your department has never taken action to actually change the legislative framework to improve the situation?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Thank you for the question.

Indeed, the act has been in effect since 2013. There are a lot of questions about the regulations and the need to change them. However, I must say that our first nations partners do not agree with the

elements of the bill that was tabled in 2013 that led to the creation of the act.

We are willing to work with them. Once we develop a bill with them, there may be a way to work together on the regulations. The fact is, we don't want to do it on our own. Legislation of this nature must be developed jointly. To do that, we are willing to work with our first nations partners.

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** So you're starting from the beginning, so to speak. The government made this commitment in 2015. There were 160 long-term drinking water advisories in first nations communities. The government said it was going to fix everything by March 31, 2021. Then the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

We understand the situation, but do you think the government would really have been able to achieve its goal of getting this all done by March 31, 2021, had the COVID-19 pandemic not occurred?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Even in the early spring of 2020, we were still trying to find ways to achieve that goal by working on the action plan with the communities. That was still our goal. We realized, especially during the summer and early fall, given the third wave, that our challenges would be more numerous. That's when we thought we would need more time. The realization that we needed long-term solutions, not just short-term ones, meant that the timelines were pushed back.

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** I want to understand the situation well, Ms. Fox. The problem has a cause. What was unrealistic, the goal or the timelines?

We can set the COVID-19 pandemic aside. Indeed, the Auditor General's report notes that even before the pandemic, some projects were slowing down and many were already behind schedule. So the pandemic cannot be blamed.

Is it incompetence, an unrealistic goal? What is the problem?

We can redo action plans and meet again in 5, 10 or 15 years, but I for one do not want people to have to continue to live in precarious and unacceptable conditions.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** I agree with you. We have the same goal, which is to ensure that everyone has access to safe drinking water.

We were doing our job with timelines, community realities and construction seasons in mind. We were still working hard to meet the March 2021 target.

Unfortunately, 52 long-term drinking water advisories remain in place in 33 communities, but we are committed to doing everything we can to lift them.

I want to emphasize that the work isn't just about long-term advisories. We have lifted 179 short-term advisories and, as a result, several communities have not been put in a difficult position in the long term. I don't want to minimize the effort required to eliminate the 179 short-term advisories.

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Ms. Fox, I'm trying to understand what happened in your organization. At one point, you described the situation and noted that the March 31, 2021, deadline would not be met.

At what point did you realize that?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** In our discussions over the summer and fall of 2020, we recognized the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the second wave, which took place from October to January in first nations communities, all our attention was consumed by the pandemic. During that time, there were 5,000 cases in on-reserve communities, and the entire team was dedicated to dealing with the issues related to the pandemic.

That's when we realized it would have been irresponsible to bring construction workers into the communities. We were making every effort to protect the physical and mental health of people in the communities that were really affected by the crisis. We had to ensure there was access to food and isolation centres. That became our main focus because of our commitment to first nations communities.

• (1230)

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** According to your department, the reason—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you. I'm sorry, Mr. Blanchette-Joncas; you basically have seven seconds left.

We will now move on to Ms. Ashton for six minutes.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you.

My question is to the Auditor General.

York Factory First Nation has now gone six weeks without clean drinking water and has declared a state of emergency after their so-called state-of-the-art water treatment plant that was built one year ago failed them, forcing them, like TCN, to pay out of pocket for both testing and clean drinking water. The chronic water shortages have forced the school, the day care and the restaurant to close, and they have been left without proper fire and emergency services during this pandemic right now.

I'm sure we can all agree that this situation is unacceptable.

In your report, you make reference to how woefully insufficient funding to maintain water treatment plants has been. According to the report, the ISC's operation and maintenance funding formula is out of date. What is the government not doing that leads to communities with so-called state-of-the-art water treatment plants being without clean drinking water?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** Unfortunately, I don't think I can speak specifically to that community. I don't know where they would fit in some of our findings. I'm not sure that even my colleague Glenn could get there. If you want something more specific, we could

probably get back to you on that. I can point you to our overall findings again and then refer you to the department for some more specifics about that community.

I do acknowledge that all of this is very interconnected. Access to safe drinking water has so many ripple effects through a community, and you rightly point out that it's unacceptable in Canada in 2021 for many first nations communities to be in this situation.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** To the Auditor General again, I've referenced multiple first nations in our region—Tataskweyak Cree Nation, Shamattawa First Nation, Red Sucker Lake First Nation, York Factory First Nation and Garden Hill First Nation—and those are in our riding alone. This repeats itself across the country, and it shouldn't have to be this way. It's something we regularly hear from this government, but what the AG's report—your report—made clear is that this government hasn't done the work, not just last summer but over a number of years.

Now the government won't give us a deadline for when their commitment to end clean drinking water advisories for first nations by March of 21 will be complete. The briefing note sent quite late this morning mentioned that you believe that long-term solutions for some communities won't be in place until at least 2025. This is an unacceptable failure by Indigenous Services Canada and this Liberal government, but they haven't been willing to give an actual timeline.

In your opinion, did this year's budget deal with the lack of funding to solve the problem, or were there just more empty words from this government?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** I was very happy to see a renewed commitment for additional operating and maintenance funding in the fall economic statement and in the budget, but as I mentioned in my opening remarks, it is difficult to know if that funding will be sufficient, in our view, until the funding formula updates have been addressed and taken care of. It shouldn't just factor in what the funding formula believes now is the right funding for each first nation; it should consider advances in technology and other factors. It should also ensure that operator salaries can be addressed in that bucket.

I think that until that funding formula is addressed, it is difficult to know whether it will be sufficient.

• (1235)

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Just quickly, this is a question for the ISC.

I've referenced numerous first nations in our riding that still don't have access to clean drinking water. Is it acceptable that in 2021 in Canada, a country as rich as ours, first nations continue to face this situation?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** No, it is not acceptable. We believe all Canadians should have access to clean drinking water, absolutely. That's what pushes and motivates our department to work directly with chiefs and councils to address these issues.

You mentioned York Factory. We have been in touch. We have teams on standby 24-7 to take calls from indigenous leaders, whether it be on water issues, fire, mental health supports or COVID. In terms of York Factory, the water is back up and running. However, the chief and council have decided that they want to do additional testing before they turn it back on.

When issues arise, we want to be responsive and we want to work in lockstep with them to try to address those concerns.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Finally, perhaps I could make a closing remark.

I really appreciate the work of the AG team on this issue. I would like to point out, as was raised by other colleagues, the perhaps veiled attack on the lack of response from first nations leaders. First nations leaders have been fighting for their lives and the lives of the members of their community. This idea that somehow the AG report is not fully legitimate because they didn't hear from them is so wrong and it is an unacceptable attack, frankly. The chief of Red Sucker Lake First Nation had COVID himself when he was fighting for a second water truck for his community.

The struggle is very real, and this is not the time to play political games. I very much appreciate the work that's being done to address this human rights violation in Canada right now. First nations deserve clean drinking water now.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Ashton.

We will move into our next round of questioning, starting with Mr. Webber for five minutes.

**Mr. Len Webber:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I had originally asked this question of you, Ms. Hogan, back in March when you tabled the reports. It's about the hiring practices on first nation communities.

Ms. Hogan indicated that it wasn't part of her audit, so I will ask you, Ms. Fox, about what role the federal government has in the hiring practices of first nation communities. I specifically asked Ms. Hogan, so I'll ask you, Ms. Fox, whether or not any first nation reserves have restricted water supply jobs to indigenous and band workers only. If so, does this affect their ability to find qualified people to fill these positions? Has this created any continuity issues in the plants' operations?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** I think what I would say is that the department is involved in terms of providing funding to first nations leadership, but it is the responsibility of the first nations to manage the contract. Of course, through the terms and conditions of our funding, there are certain requirements. We really try to offer that if they need any types of supports in terms of the contract, such as setting up the contract or in terms of contractors, we're happy to work with them. Ultimately, however, the decision is theirs.

With respect to your question about the decisions on the water maintenance operators, who they hire to do these supports is absolutely up to the chief and council. As I think I mentioned, the O and M funding that is available now really allows them to give competitive salaries, to recruit youth and women in their communities, and to really work with them, so the question is best placed with them. Have they held back on hiring? I haven't been privy to that type of information. I think now we can say that with investment, especially that \$1.5 billion of operation funding in the fall economic statement, they're really well positioned to hire the talent they need to monitor their systems. Then through the department's circuit rider training program, they can be supported through a group of learners and facilitators to allow them to really have the impact in their communities and on their systems.

• (1240)

**Mr. Len Webber:** Thank you for that. That leads to my question here also.

First of all, there was a survey conducted by a consortium of universities led by Concordia. They found that two-thirds of water operators on first nations reserves were earning lower than the median wage of operators elsewhere, outside reserves. Sometimes they are working for close to minimum wage, often while on call 24-7. Many of the operations operate this way in first nation communities, with the safety of their drinking water reliant on just one or a few underpaid and overworked operators.

I know, as you indicated, that it's not your role to determine salaries and such, but certainly with this new funding in place, they can look at these wages, as you've indicated. I just think that it's incredibly important that we look at retention. It was brought up by Mr. Longfield and Mr. Sorbara as well. Retention seems to be a recurring issue.

Again, it is up to the first nation communities, then, to determine the wages and salaries. Would bonuses be much cheaper than the costs associated with water advisories? It just makes sense to me to pay them fair wages. Do you have any comments on that, Ms. Fox?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** I think what I would say is that the investments that we've made in budget 2019 and the fall economic statement about the O and M allow them to increase their wages. Now we're at 100% of that O and M funding formula. I think it does, with regard to your point, really give the chief and council the opportunity to pay fair wages. If a community were to decide to kind of supplement for performance, that would be entirely up to the community. We would, obviously, be supportive of that.

I also think it's important to note that the skills and training, and the continued training and learning as new technologies come into play, are really important. If O and M funding allows that, as new water technologies emerge and as people can survey the water systems remotely versus doing the testing more manually.... All of those things are incorporated in this additional funding of O and M to allow for that. It is up to the band and council to make those final decisions. However, they need to have the funding to be able to do that, and that's what we're trying to provide.

**Mr. Len Webber:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Webber.

We will now go to Mr. Fergus for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.):** Madam Chair, since I was absent for the bulk of this morning's meeting, I will turn the floor over to my colleague Mr. Blois.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Fergus.

Go ahead, Mr. Blois.

**Mr. Kody Blois:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Webber was hitting on this in terms of capacity, so my question is to the Auditor General.

You've looked at this issue. Clean water on reserves has been a legacy issue you talked about in reports in 2005 and 2011. Is this just a money issue, or is there more at play here in terms of how we get it?

We talk about the budget allocations. I'm proud of the fact that our government is stepping up to put more money on the table. However, is money alone going to solve some of these challenges?

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** We didn't really address this in the audit.

In my opinion, money alone is not enough. Money is absolutely needed when you make commitments or create laws and regulations. You need the funding to support the infrastructure, the investment and the time that need to go with all of these things. It isn't just about money, but money is definitely an important aspect.

One of the last things I would highlight is probably the training that would then be needed to maintain those trained operators. However, what we've seen across so many of our audits on indigenous issues is that this is not unique to water treatment plants. It's also the ability to attract and retain resources when it comes to nursing staff, mental health practitioners. There are so many issues. It's very interconnected in the north and on reserves with housing as well, so it isn't just money. There's a much bigger, broader, more comprehensive issue.

• (1245)

**Mr. Kody Blois:** "Capacity" is the word. "Capacity" seems to be the word.

With that, Ms. Fox, just as a quick follow-up to Mr. Webber, he mentioned—and I'll take his report at face value, because I don't have it in front of me—that two-thirds of individuals who are working in these spaces might be earning near or around minimum

wage. I have to assume that when Indigenous Services Canada puts its block of funding to indigenous communities, it would not just be on a basis of minimum wage.

What type of accountability or what type of oversight, if any, do we have to ensure that the block of funding is supporting certain outcomes, such as improvement over minimum wage, or to ensure that the money is in place to retrain these types of workers that we need?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Thank you so much. It's a great question.

I think what is really important to note is again—and I've come to this point a lot—that it's about that respectful relationship and it's about indigenous leaders making those decisions. Of course, we want to work with them because they will have skills and training needs in their community for broader infrastructure, for water infrastructure, and it's about working closely with them to empower them to make those decisions and provide them with the resources to enable that decision-making, because if you don't have—

**Mr. Kody Blois:** I just want to hammer down on this. You mentioned your allocation of funding to indigenous communities. Surely as part of that funding model, the actual amount that you would allocate would take into consideration the number of employees who might be needed per community and would surely not be based at minimum wage. Is that a fair statement?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Yes, but at the end of the day we cannot dictate what the salary will be for that worker in that community.

**Mr. Kody Blois:** Okay. That was my question.

Ms. Fox, you talked earlier about wanting to get to the point of enabling indigenous communities to take even more leadership in terms of departments such as water. You mentioned that Indigenous Services will provide funding, and we talked about how we need to increase that funding. There is capacity building. What, in your mind, does enabling indigenous communities to have that final leadership look like?

It seems as though we've already devolved a lot of that power, outside of actual funding, to indigenous communities. Does that look like raising their own source of revenue with their community? What does that actually look like in your mind?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Yes, I think that's an excellent question.

It would be things like the environmental public health officers, for instance, who do the testing. At this point right now, we're in a process of transferring that responsibility and that funding from the employees I have here in Indigenous Services Canada to funding people in communities to take on those roles and provide that kind of skills and training, so it's not limited to the operators. It's about health transformation and working with communities so that the Indigenous Services Canada nurses now become nurses of the community. It's all part of our overall governmental objective to transform those services, and water is one of them.

You are right that we are making progress towards that transformation by empowering leadership to take on these responsibilities, and I think we will continue to do that throughout our mandate here.

**Mr. Kody Blois:** Thank you, Madam Chair, I think that might be my time, although I wish I had more.

**The Chair:** Yes, you are right on time. Thank you so much, Ms. Fox and Mr. Blois.

We will now move into our last round of questioning of two and a half minutes, starting with Mr. Blanchette-Joncas.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will continue with questions for Ms. Fox.

Ms. Fox, earlier, I was trying to understand whether the government's goal of fixing all the problems before March 31, 2021, was realistic before the pandemic.

From what I understand, the pandemic turned all plans upside down. Is that correct?

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** In any infrastructure project, there are realities that mean there are sometimes delays. I can't say that there were no delays before the COVID-19 pandemic. There are always projects that move a little faster or slower than others.

We were working closely with the committees to really understand the project and the timelines, and how we could make up for any delays. That was the reality we were living with, even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a very significant impact on the progress of some infrastructure projects, not just water projects. As a result, we have had to rethink our timelines and realize that the closure of several communities necessitated extending our deadline beyond March 31, 2021.

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you, Ms. Fox. That answers my question.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, but there were still delays before the pandemic.

In terms of the drinking water systems assessed that have the same issues as in 2015, almost half of the systems are at high or medium risk. A comparison of the 2019-20 and the 2014-15 reports shows that, five years later, the situation is the same.

How is that there has been no improvement in five years?

• (1250)

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** First, I confirm that the department was working through the summer and fall with the goal of meeting the deadline. It was only in the fall that this changed, when the Minister asked that work not continue based on that timeline. I just wanted to clarify that.

In terms of the percentage of systems at risk, we saw reductions in risk, especially for systems that were high risk. The percentage was close to 20% at one point, based on our risk assessment system. In 2019-20, that percentage was between 14% and 15%. The number of systems that were high risk has been reduced.

There are still systems that are at risk, because some of them aren't intended for long-term use. They are temporary systems, which are inherently higher risk—

**Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Ms. Fox, my question was about high- and medium-risk systems.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We will now move on to Ms. Ashton for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you.

First, I have a comment. I find it pretty rich when I hear Liberals talking about how it's not just about money and it is about capacity. I mean, where's the political will? It's pretty disrespectful to blame first nations for not having clean drinking water. I have heard and visited communities where first nations are doing everything they can with what they've got to meet the need in their communities. The stories right now in 2021, during a pandemic, are stories that are inhumane and are reflective of third world living conditions, so just to set the record straight here, what we are missing is political will from this government.

I want to go to the AG to ask, based on their report, how devastating is it that so many first nations do not have access to clean drinking water? Does this also connect with their—

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** On a point of order, this is really hard on my ears. I can only imagine the trouble the translators are having. It's very loud.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Longfield.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** I love how passion, especially from women, is often misconstrued as being just "loud".

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** No. It's your mouthpiece, I think. It has to go up higher.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Well, I'll take my cues from the techs, thank you.

To go back to the AG, when communities don't have clean drinking water, is it limiting in other ways in terms of their ability to provide other services, whether it's opening up schools or expanding health care services? We know that when there isn't enough access to quality water in communities, there are a number of other domino effects.

I'm wondering if the AG could speak to that.

**Ms. Karen Hogan:** We definitely didn't look at all of those domino effects in our audit, but I do agree with you. We did highlight the boil water advisory and what it impacts—fundamental things like bathing your young children or preparing food. It requires a community to boil their water before they can do so. Not having access to safe drinking water obviously has an impact on the general health of any human being.

The ripple effect is definitely one that's there and one that will impact generations of first nations. That's why it's so important to find those long-term solutions as soon as possible.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Hogan and Ms. Ashton.

That brings us to the end of our questioning.

I would like to thank our witnesses for joining us today.

As well, thank you, colleagues, for all of your very good questions.

I will now invite our witnesses to take their leave.

**Ms. Christiane Fox:** Thank you very much. Have a good day.

**The Chair:** You too.

Colleagues, you all should have received the revised calendar for April and May. I know that our clerk and our analysts worked quickly to get this into your hands so that you could take a look at it. Are there any questions?

Seeing none—

• (1255)

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Berthold.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** I was trying to find my “raise hand” option.

For May 13, we will have the meeting...

[*Translation*]

I'll switch back to French.

On May 13, we will have a meeting with people who will explain the cabinet confidences, and we will be looking at two reports. I suggested that we immediately schedule an extension of the meeting until 2:00 p.m., which would make it a three-hour meeting. We could then plan our schedule accordingly.

Does everyone agree to proceed this way? I would like us to plan for this meeting to be a little longer than usual. That way, we don't have to extend the meeting by half an hour or 45 minutes at the meeting

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Berthold.

I know that at times we do go over time. We try to keep it to a minimum, given the pressures that are on our technicians and other staff, because there are other meetings that need to begin when ours ends.

I would ask the clerk to weigh in on our ability to extend a meeting by an hour on May 13, and then perhaps we can hear from our colleagues as well on whether this will work with their schedules.

Mr. Longfield...

Oh, I'm sorry. Madam Clerk, would you like to go first?

**The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Angela Crandall):** No, please let Mr. Longfield go.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** Thank you. That's where I was going as well. I could have brought my hand down.

We looked at an hour. If we could still have our committee meeting in two hours, if that option is available, it would be wonderful.

**The Chair:** If I am understanding correctly, Mr. Longfield, we have a two-hour meeting scheduled. Mr. Berthold is asking for an additional hour, so we would be meeting for three hours.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** Yes, exactly. I'm agreeing with Mr. Berthold.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you.

**The Clerk:** If I may, Madam Chair—

**The Chair:** Please go ahead, Madam Clerk.

**The Clerk:** I have reached out to the law clerk's office, and he's available for one hour. He has another meeting that's in conflict with our meeting, but he can come during the first hour of the meeting. If Mr. Berthold is looking to extend the meeting so that we have two hours for the draft reports....

Is that the case, sir?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Berthold, you want to extend the meeting so we can look at the draft reports. Is that it?

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** I just wanted to make sure we had time to do everything we had to do. We have two draft reports to look at, and there is a one-hour briefing to consider. I would suggest that we start with the one-hour briefing, which is extremely important. After that, we could continue until 2:00 p.m., if necessary and if we run out of time.

However, I'd like us to schedule the extension right away so that we don't have to do it on the day of the meeting in case we need another 15 minutes to finish a report. It's easier to schedule, if we know right away that the meeting is likely to be extended. I'm asking if it's possible to do that. I'd also ask my colleagues to schedule it so we can review the two draft reports that we'll be considering on May 13.

[English]

**The Chair:** I have seen a thumbs-up and I'm seeing heads nodding, so if we can work it out with the technical staff to be able to extend our meeting, it looks as though our committee would want to do that, Madam Clerk.

Go ahead, Mr. Sorbara.

**Mr. Francesco Sorbara:** I just want to say thank you, Chair, and thank you to the clerk and the analyst, for rejigging our schedule to make it work.

Concerning Mr. Berthold's idea—I think Mr. Longfield chimed in as well—I'm in full support. This committee is very important to me on many levels. First of all, I enjoy it, but secondly, the reports from the Auditor General are very important in terms of how government works and in terms of transparency and accountability. I told my staff to always leave the hour before question period free in case this committee needs to run overtime. I'm all for it.

• (1300)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

**The Clerk:** I will confirm with the services that the hour is available. This far in advance, we should be able to arrange it. When the notice is issued, if we have permission, I'll put it for the three hours.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Colleagues, with that change, do I have a motion to adopt the revised work calendar?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. That's excellent.

I also want to let you know that the meeting on Tuesday will be on the Canada child benefit with the Canada Revenue Agency.

Thank you very much, colleagues. Enjoy the rest of your day.

The meeting is adjourned.

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